

Opinion: Here's how to actually help stop cyberbullying

By Geoffrey A. Fowler, Washington Post on 07.20.18

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Image 1. Britain's Prince William (second from left) meets YouTube vloggers (from left) Dodie Clark, Nikki Lilly and Riyadh Khalaf during his visit to launch a national effort to tackle cyberbullying at the headquarters of Google and YouTube in London, England. In the United States, first lady Melania Trump is also working to stop cyberbullying. Photo: Tolga Akmen - WPA Pool/Getty Images

First lady Melania Trump has announced she will fight cyberbullying. On March 20, 2018, which happened to be her son Barron's 12th birthday, she convened the tech companies Amazon, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Snap. Together, they discussed online harassment and promoting Internet safety.

Here's the truth Mrs. Trump might not have heard from the tech giants: Websites have had bully-reporting tools and states have had bullying laws for more than a decade. Yet the problem isn't getting much better. As of late 2016, a third of U.S. students say they've been the victim of cyberbullying at some point. That's according to the Cyberbullying Research Center. Last year, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine said bullying had become a "serious public health problem."

So what can be done? I visited a public elementary school teaching kids as young as kindergarten how to deal with the dark side of the Internet. And I spoke with students, educators, parents and researchers. They showed me that some of the most promising solutions for this online problem have their roots in the offline world.

In this first major push, Mrs. Trump isn't expected to unveil proposals. Rather, according to people invited to the meeting, she will ask the companies about how they're addressing problems such as trolls and promoting kindness.

"We need much, much more," said Parry Aftab. She is a lawyer and founder of WiredSafety, one of the oldest cybersafety groups. More resources for parents, more help for schools, and more coordination on solutions, she said. "But very little of it has to do with new laws."

Many parents struggle to keep up with apps. And many kids can't figure where the line is between rudeness and bullying. It's also not totally clear who's responsible for policing bad behavior. State laws often say schools have to deal with the problem. Yet only about a dozen specify schools have authority over off-campus behaviors. Some schools are forced to just add anti-cyberbullying efforts onto the job of an already-overworked counselor. Meanwhile, zero-tolerance policies sometimes lead to underreporting of incidents.

The first lady's experience as a mother and her life in the spotlight as a model give Mrs. Trump a unique vantage point on bullying. Here are five ideas the first lady could get behind.

Teach "Digital Citizenship"

Jennifer Thor is a second- and third-grade teacher at Greenbrook Elementary in Danville, California. In her class, the final lesson on a recent Friday was about the power of online communication. In one exercise, the students compared how each might have different reactions to the same emoji icon. In another, they made cartoons about a time someone was made to feel bad online. Then they discussed how they could get a happy outcome by first cooling down and then talking to a trusted adult. "It's important to teach kids to monitor their own behavior as well as filter all the stuff that's out there," says Thor. Even at age 8, some of these students shared personal experience with being attacked online.

This school uses so-called digital citizenship curriculum. It was created by the nonprofit Common Sense Media. And Greenbrook is hardly alone: Some 54,000 schools - half of American schools - now use Common Sense's free Kindergarten through 12th-grade programs. Other organizations offer similar programs. Last year Washington State mandated a more systematic public education effort for digital citizenship and media literacy. Several other states, including California, are weighing similar laws. Next year, Common Sense plans to overhaul its lessons. It will place even more of an emphasis on digital drama and hate speech.

Focus On Bystanders

America might be able to learn from Finland. There, a national anti-bullying education program called KiVa has been shown to greatly benefit the kids who experienced the most bullying. Its secret: a focus on increasing the empathy of bystanders, who can keep bullies from gaining status and power.

KiVa asks students to do role-playing exercises and computer simulations. These sessions push them to think about how they would intervene to reduce bullying. Anti-bullying programs usually seek to reduce the overall rates of bullying. But KiVa's focus on bystanders showed a significant mental health boost - reducing depression and improving self-esteem - for the victims of bullying.



Finnish culture may not translate exactly to diverse American kids, but researchers are now studying how to the ideas might work here.

Make A Clearinghouse Of Ideas

The Obama administration convened a group of experts and created the website stopbullying.gov, but not much change followed. What's missing is a place to help everyone share ideas and research on what works. We can't expect teachers and parents to do dig through academic and legal literature on this stuff.

"The government can lead efforts to help clarify for schools what works and then possibly even provide funding to implement those things," says Justin Patchin. He's a professor of criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center. "We don't know a lot about what works because we haven't been able to evaluate programs."

Demand More Of Tech Companies

The worst-case scenario from this week's White House meeting is that the tech companies just walk away with a photo opp. We could insist on much more. That starts with making bully reporting systems easier to use, and parental control tools easier to find. This could perhaps even be a selling point for their products. (Apple last week introduced a website with info on how to find all its parental controls. However, the company didn't take any steps to make these controls more powerful or intuitive.)

"I would love to see just-in-time messages pop up," suggests Stephen Balkam, the CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute. He was invited to the White House meeting. (Balkam also serves an adviser to Facebook and Twitter. His organization gets some funding from tech companies.) He says the apps themselves could ask parents: "Have you checked yours and your kids' privacy settings? Do you know how many hours per day your fourth grader is online?"

But other solutions could be difficult: Should having a Facebook account under the age of 18 require a parent's email address? And could social networks draw a firmer line on unacceptable behavior? "They need to start shutting down accounts of kids who are engaging in this stuff," says Aftab. Game companies, she says, often take away accounts for trolling. Social networks tend to focus only on the most-egregious cases, though.

Get Kids In The Room

One lesson from the survivors of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, is that teenagers who have grown up with social media are more skilled at using these tools than adults to build movements for issues they care about.

And the most effective voice to say bullying has gone too far is probably going to come from peers. "We've all dealt with it," Ulysses Bergel, a 13-year-old from Wyckoff, New Jersey, told me. He's now working with Aftab's organization to develop an anti-cyberbullying app. "I think the kids in my generation are crucial the solution, and this isn't just Gen Z pride speaking."

Quiz

- 1 How effective is the introduction at introducing the topic of cyberbullying?
- (A) It is effective because it explains what the article is going to be about and what the main problem is.
 - (B) It is effective because it describes the proposals the First Lady wants to present to the American people.
 - (C) It is not effective because it fails to explain the connection between the First Lady and cyberbullying.
 - (D) It is not effective because it does not mention anything about how many kids suffer from cyberbullying.
- 2 Why does the author include the information about a Finnish program?
- (A) to highlight one of the programs that First Lady Melania Trump is interested in using
 - (B) to show how a country with the same type of diversity as the United States is approaching cyberbullying
 - (C) to demonstrate a program that was created by kids to end the problem of cyberbullying
 - (D) to describe a program that has seen some success in helping the victims of bullies
- 3 In the following options, who is MOST critical of Mrs. Trump's approach to cyberbullying? Which quote supports this choice?
- (A) Parry Aftab; "We need much, much more," said Parry Aftab.
 - (B) Jennifer Thor; "It's important to teach kids to monitor their own behavior as well as filter all the stuff that's out there," says Thor.
 - (C) Justin Patchin; "We don't know a lot about what works because we haven't been able to evaluate programs."
 - (D) Stephen Balkam; "I would love to see just-in-time messages pop up," suggests Stephen Balkam, the CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute.
- 4 Which of the following claims is supported by logical reasons and evidence in the text?
- (A) Melania Trump's proposed solutions are based on studies done in the last 10 years.
 - (B) Social networks are having more incidents of bullying than video game companies.
 - (C) At least 1 out of 3 kids has experienced some type of online bullying at least once.
 - (D) The Obama administration had a cyberbullying program that was met with great approval.